Urban Flight & the Pandemic
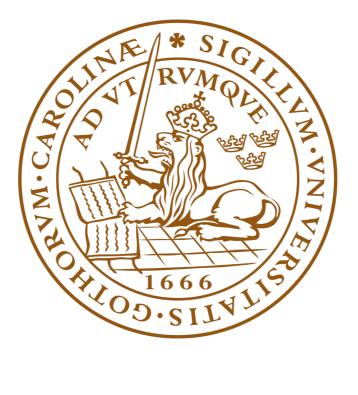
A study of the drives behind urban emigration in Sweden in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

In March 2020 the Swedish public health authorities imposed the first of many restrictions on social interaction, as a way to limit the spread of the covid-19 pandemic. Coinciding with this is a new standard to work from home, as well as increased waves of migration out of Sweden's major cities. This thesis aims to gain an understanding of current trends of urban emigration in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic in Sweden, as well as how said pandemic is affecting people's relationships to the urban environment. This is accomplished through a case study research design, focusing on collecting empirical material through six semi-structured interviews with people who have moved from an urban to a rural location, mainly since the start of the pandemic. The data has been processed and then analysed through a conceptual framework focusing on a relational approach to urbanity and migration. The findings of the study concludes that there is an ongoing romantization and a longing for rural life within Sweden's middle class, increasingly acted upon as a result of the pandemic and the subsequently increased digitalization of day-to-day life. Additionally, digitalization is deemed to be a major enabling factor to the process of migration as it removes some of its obstacles, enabling more to pursue it. Finally, it is concluded that the process of urban emigration is a privileged one, allowing some to exchange an increasingly overwhelming urban life for a self-realizing rural.

Key words: *urbanity, counter-urbanization, rurality, migration, back-to-the-landers, Covid-19, the pandemic.*

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1. Introduction

With the start of the industrial revolution came the emergence of the modern city, and the drive for urbanization to take hold. The level of urbanization enabled by, as well as tied to, the capitalist system has shaped the world as we know it today, with global cities continuing to grow and interconnect. Almost a decade ago, a report produced by Boverket (the Swedish national board of housing, building and planning) predicted that urban dwelling in Sweden would keep increasing and cities become more dense (Boverket, 2012). However, a more recent report presents that though Swedish cities continue to grow, rural dwelling is no longer decreasing (Boverket, 2019). The report concludes that the continuous development of urbanization can co-exist with a new wave of people moving to the countryside, because of recent positive increases in migration into Sweden. As immigrants move into the Swedish cities, their net growth is sustained, whilst internal trends simultaneously point towards an increase in rural dwelling. This is exemplified by Sweden's three largest cities, Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, which have all had a negative net growth in terms of people moving there since 2014, which would probably have been even more clear without the national increase in population around the same time (Boverket, 2019).

This brings us up to present day Sweden and a time defined by the global pandemic of Covid-19. In addition to taking lives, the pandemic has limited and altered our working life as well as how we interact and move about society. Digitalization combined with the dissuasion from traveling and using public transport has enabled as well as forced most people's home environments to accommodate both work and recreation. It is clear that the consequences of Covid-19 have drastically changed the way we live, but the long-term effects of this is not yet possible to research to a larger extent. One of the consequences that has been observed, however, seems to be an increase in the migration from cities to the countryside. Headlines such as *Rethinking urban planning in a post-covid world* (WSP, 2020), *Has COVID led to "urban flight?"* (Furth, 2020)*,* and *Flytt från städer - en långsiktig trend, inte bara Corona (The move from cities – a long term trend, not just Corona)* (Simonsson, 2021) seem to speculate on a wave of "ruralization" in contrast to the urban norm that has dominated western society throughout modern history. This is not the first time deviation from the otherwise relatively linear process of urbanization has been observed though. In the 1970's there was a

mainly political movement of families in Sweden moving out of cities as a protest against the stress of modern society. This movement was dubbed the "green wave" (Holmberg, 1998).

Thus, although some trends of urban emigration have been visible even before the start of the pandemic, something about recent events seems to have intensified the urge for some people to exchange urban life for rural. As the possibility of a new "green wave" is looking more and more likely, it is relevant to investigate what role the pandemic plays in this development. Is the intensification of what people are experiencing as a longing for nature only temporary? Or have recent extraordinary events simply accelerated a new societal era that we were already heading towards? As digitalization, work flexibility and online shopping become more commonplace, the pandemic is marking a time where the geographical closeness of the city becomes redundant. With the advantages of urban life becoming less obvious, will it change how we relate to the urban environment, and if so, how we relate to each other? In other words, this essay bases itself on the sociological assumption that individual agency is closely linked to and upheld by culture and societal norms, meaning that the sudden change in migratory behaviour, seemingly triggered by the pandemic, is of importance to study.

1.1   Aim & Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the underlying factors to which a possible new green wave spurred by the pandemic is occurring. Hence, I aim to gain an understanding of the personal narratives that have driven people living in Sweden to move from a city to the countryside in the last five years, as well as reason around the privilege of being able to move during the hard times caused by a pandemic. The objective of this is to further understand the trends of counter-urbanization that currently circulate in society. I rely on the interviewees own definitions of what living in a city versus what living in the countryside entails, since the focus remains on their own experiences of both. The time span aims to capture the experiences of people moving both before and during the pandemic, this to enable a degree of comparison.

Hence, the research questions for this essay are:
- *Why are people increasingly moving from urban to rural areas?*
    - *How does the Covid-19 pandemic factor into current trends of urban emigration?*
- *And, how do societal events, like a global pandemic, change the way we relate to the urban environment?*

1.2   Previous Research

The concepts of urban space and urbanization have been extensively researched and theorized (for an overview, see for example Short, 2014). The framework of urban theory includes everything from the emergence of agricultural cities in early Neolithic societies such as those in the middle east or China, to modern readings of the structure of capitalist cities in the western world (Short, 2014). Within the framework of urban sociology, the discussion around urbanity often departs from a Marxist position, focusing on division of labour and historical processes (Harvey, 1985; Harvey and Potter, 2009; Therborn, 2017). Other times it revolves around the relational viewpoint, where societal structure and social processes are informed by space as a contextual setting (Massey, 2005; Murdoch, 2006; Simmel, 1950). In terms of human geography and studies on migration, themes of economy, ecology and social processes often intersect with the importance of place. Discussing urbanity from this broad paradigm can entail models relating space to time, economic systems or cultural landscapes (for an overview, see for example Nayak & Jeffrey, 2013).

Counter-urbanization, on the other hand, is a term used to describe urban-to-rural migration. The concept has been studied in relation to the Swedish countryside, where density, as well as the percentage of people actually working in the primary sector, which includes the agricultural subdivision, is low (Amcoff and Niedomysl, 2011). Most people in Sweden, regardless of the environment in which they live, seem to be employed in other sectors, often located in more urban areas. One can conclude that there is a larger potential for rural growth than that which is currently being observed, and that people with higher income and education, as well as women and families without children have a weaker preference for rural dwelling than their counterparts (Amcoff and Niedomysl, 2011:271). The concepts especially relevant to this thesis will be further elaborated in chapter *3. Theoretical Framework.*

1.3   Disposition

The structure of this essay is divided into multiple themes, introducing the subject matter through chapters *Introduction, Background* and *Theoretical Framework.* This is followed by a chapter on *Methodology,* thoroughly explaining the empirical data and its acquisition. Finally, chapters *Analysis* and *Conclusion* discuss the results of the study, based on the empirical material in relation to the conceptual framework presented in the initial chapters.

2. Background

This chapter introduces some of the historically important concepts in regard to the dichotomy between urban and rural environments. It also raises contemporary trends and discourse surrounding modern society's relationship to cities and the countryside.

2.1   Urbanity & the Urban Norm

The process of *urbanization* can be defined in different terms, but generally refers to an increase of urban dwelling, meaning people living in cities, or increased urban geography, meaning the size and sprawl of cities. This process varies between countries and different parts of the world. Although, it is estimated that since 2009, more than half the world's population resides in urban areas: a figure that has sky rocketed since the industrial revolution (Therborn, 2017:7). However, this concrete way of measuring urbanity constitutes only one of multiple definitions of what is *urban* and as a result, there are multiple ways to discuss *urbanization.*

For example, Batty (2020) writes about the complexity of the city and how one of its defining qualities is constant change, which makes it hard to measure or predict. Another perspective is introduced by Lefebvre (2003), who writes about the shift from the city as centre for *political* power, to becoming the *market city*, to the *industrial city* and finally to what he refers to as the *critical zone*. The presence of these different stages varies between different parts of world, but one can conclude that the city has historically been the epicentre of what holds power and value in a given time and place in society. Lefebvre goes on to argue that the present stage, the *critical zone* is a sort of totality of urbanism. The city as we know it today is the face of a completely urbanized, global society. No longer does each city exist on its own but is part of an expansive network that has transformed the countryside into an "environment" for the cities; a complement for resources and recreational needs (Lefebvre, 2003:11).

Having established the complexity and historical importance of urban space and the process of urbanization, it is important to discuss *the urban norm*. The urban norm refers to a currently dominating discourse, in which the rural is considered "secondary" or "deviating" from the normative urban. Researchers like Forsberg (2001) have compared this hierarchy to that between genders, meaning that the urban norm is connected to the male, patriarchal norm and the inequalities which it entails. By upholding an urban norm, we are simultaneously

subjugating rural areas, creating a power imbalance which has real, physical consequences for the communities in question (Forsberg, 2001:152).

2.2   Rurality – In Contempt & Romantization

In contrast to the urban environment, the rural has since the industrial revolution lost in popularity as well as population, unable to keep up with the attraction of the city. As the agricultural sector become more industrialized, it constitutes only 1,7 % of the Swedish workforce (Statens Jordbruksverk, 2017). In addition to declining work opportunities, rural communities have, over the last century, been hollowed out as a result of urbanized migration patterns (Bjerke et al., 2012). This, in combination with providing a contrast to the urban, allows rural stereotypes, such as a perceived narrow-mindedness, lack of diversity or opposition to modern development, to take hold. This is problematic because stereotypes uphold and recreate themselves, as well as increase the gap between the urban and the rural. A negative perception of the rural lifestyle deters investments and potential development, whilst also enabling xenophobic values to take hold, hence confirming and upholding the stereotypes (Eriksson, 2010).

However, rural life and living is simultaneously romanticized. The last few years have observed a surge in mainstream media's coverage of stories fitting this narrative. Shows like *Help, we bought a farm* (*Hjälp, vi har köpt en bondgård*), *House dreams* (*Husdrömmar*), and *The Mandelman's farm* (*Mandelmans gård*) all tell tales of middle- and upper-class Swedish people escaping to the countryside for a more serene and grounded lifestyle. Their stories paint a picture of frolicking through fields, rather than that of shovelling manure. The popularity of these shows tells us how both the contempt for, and the romantization of rural living can co-exist as well as be overcome by those who have the resources. Subsequently, what these stories have in common is the *voluntary choice* to move to the countryside, whilst the same praise will not be sung for those who never left (Flø, 2016).

2.3   The "Green Wave"

The "Green wave", or "back-to-the-landers" movement of the 1970's represented a political movement of abandoning the stress of city life and moving closer to nature. Holmberg (1998) writes about how the side effects of a rapidly increasing urbanization in Sweden included stress, environmental disruption, violence and rising levels of crime. To show their discontent and

distrust of government institutions ability to handle these threats, many people turned their back on Swedish cities and embraced rural living. The level of radicality and political involvement varied within the group, but what was shared was the criticism of the increasingly capitalistic culture of consumption as well as a scepticism towards the "right-left" political system. Co-living and alternative lifestyles were encouraged, as well as becoming self-sustaining and more involved in local communities. Equally important to the movement was the use of symbols; the cities' neon lights exchanged for the northern lights and so on (Holmberg, 1998:59). The lights, in this case, respectively representing the artificial and commercialized urban environment and the more natural splendour of the rural, marking the latter as more desirable. Researchers have since established that although it was clear what the people involved were trying to get away from, it is still questionable if they were aware of what they were exchanging it for, as the romantization of the countryside was apparent even back then. It is relevant to point out that although the movement contributed to a more environmentalist political consciousness, urbanization still continued (Holmberg, 1998).

2.4   The Pandemic

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) was first discovered in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (CDC, 2020). Since then, it has spread across the world, caused millions of deaths and is, at the time of writing, still not overcome. In addition to being a global health threat, the virus has imposed major strain on the world economy as well as hindered the continuous development of social welfare programs related to education and basic health services in many parts of the world. Nonetheless, the extent to which this has occurred is not yet known. As countries are being affected to different degrees, the measures taken to slow down the spread of infection differs, equally varying in success and aggression. In Sweden the pandemic has been dealt with through different social restrictions, such as avoiding crowds and public transport, as well as working from home when possible. The limitation of movement and interaction is reported to have caused side effects involving unemployment, mental health deprivation, and increased gender based violence (Broberg, 2021; Gustavsson, 2021; Mattsson, 2020).

Another recent report presents the so far observed effects of Covid-19 on the Swedish economy, including its effects on the economic side of the housing market (SCB, 2020). It shows how the amount and sums of mortgages in Sweden have increased since the start of 2020, linking this

to an increased prioritization of our home environments. This trend is significant since the Swedish overall economy has been hit hard by the pandemic. The report concludes that it is clear to observe that the need for a functional home office space is manifested as a need for larger home environments, often achieved through either renovation or migration (SCB, 2020).

Additionally, the pandemic has sped up the current wave of digitalization in Sweden. With the decree for everyone who is able to work from home, the reliability of technological infrastructure has become increasingly important. As online meetings, digital seminars and home offices have become standard, living close to one's place of work is no longer necessary. This has allowed for more flexibility regarding the shift between business hours and personal time, as well as the ability to work from anywhere with a stable internet connection. Additionally, less time is lost on "unproductive" things, like commuting or chatting by the coffee machine, though it is worth noting that occurrences like these have other values than those tied to productivity. The negative side effects of this changed work culture, is the difficulty for the employer to guarantee a healthy work environment (Arbetsmiljöverket, 2021). Whilst some companies and studies report that working from home has increased worker efficiency and enabled additional time on activities outside of work, others warn of increased mental illness, as well as feelings of isolation due to the lack of social interaction in the workplace (Forsén, 2021; Svenskt näringsliv, 2020).

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents each of the theoretical concepts that are used throughout the remainder of the essay. As the focus of this thesis is the parting from increased urbanization towards "something else", the theories discussed mainly centres around concepts of urbanity. In addition to this, there will be concepts relating to human and societal relation with space, as these are also relevant to the process of changing migration patterns, along with concepts on migration itself, naturally.

3.1   Relational Sociology

This study departs from the perspective of relational sociology. Thus, the importance of how we as individuals and actors in society, respond to specific opportunities and obstacles tied to our environment, is emphasized. In other words, unlike more rationally driven schools of thought, the context of space and time is key when discussing social interactions and events (Emirbayer, 1997:307). The relational paradigm includes multiple useful concepts and arguments, including the *transactional approach* which sees relationships between different entities as dynamic and ever-changing, meaning that they are constantly shaped and re-shaped through interactions. Related to this approach is that of *network analysis* or *network dynamics.* The study of networks includes complex mapping of patterns and ties related to interactions and relationships, including analysing and organizing the strength and importance of the ties that bind individuals and networks together (Emirbayer, 1997:299-300).

Intrinsically important terms to sociological analysis, and hence to the relational approach, are *power, freedom* and *agency.* Rather than being qualities that one can possess, a relational view champions the importance of discussing their contextual positioning. Acknowledging the terms as dynamic allows for a deeper understanding of their use, as power, freedom and agency all can be gained and lost, or rather active or inactive depending on the *time*, *place* and *with whom* they are situated (Emirbayer, 1997:291). An example of this is how an individual can experience access to power, freedom or agency as wildly varying depending on the time of day (a woman might feel more restricted or powerless at night), the geographical context (a person belonging to a minority group might have different experiences of agency depending on if they are acting within or outside of the geographical boundaries of their community), or on the

relationships to people around us (in a work place hierarchy people are likely to act in accordance to their position within said hierarchy).

3.2   Relational Space

Akin to ideas of *relational sociology* are those of *relational space,* more often discussed within the fields of urban sociology and human geography. In *Post-Structuralist Geography: A Guide to Relational Space* (2006)*,* Murdoch presents his arguments on how physical space is conditioned by social processes and is therefore fundamentally relational.

> *Space is not a 'container' for entities and processes; rather space is made by entities and processes. Moreover, these entities and processes combine in relations. Thus, space is made by relations. Space is relational.*
>
> <div align="right">Murdoch, 2006:15</div>

Hence, physical spaces act as semi-permanent representations of social processes. An example of this is gentrification, where a shift in an urban area's status affects the physical structure of it. Concurrent to the land value rising, the original community is displaced by a new social class moving in, causing the physical form of the area to organically change; through investments becoming a physical representation of the new community. The idea of physical structures as mirroring social relations must then also include power relations as being built into urban environments. Take, for example, park benches with additional armrests, or spikes in the ground outside of commercial buildings; both projecting the imposed subordination of homeless people and beggars who might otherwise sleep or sit there. Additionally, the *absence* of representations in the built environment can further reveal the inequality and suppression present in a society (Murdoch, 2006:14). The idea of marginalized communities lacking physical representations in the city is a supposition shared by and further developed by other theorists, portraying how cities as agglomerations of power and wealth have privilege built into them. Segregation, slum dwelling and displacement are all consequences of unequal access to the city, and show how the city plays a big part in upholding structural power relations (Harvey & Potter, 2009; Therborn, 2017).

Furthermore, the relationship between social classes and urban space is one that centres on power struggles. The idea of the *just city* heavily draws from the concept of relational space, as

the freedom to shape and re-shape the city is also the freedom to participate in society (Harvey & Potter, 2009:40). Access to this freedom can be said to be inherent to certain social classes. Belonging to the ruling one will give you immediate admittance, whilst belonging to a lower one is synonymous with struggle. In this instance, class is a binary division between those with power and those without. It is important to note that this class division can involve many different social groups. Depending on the context, the former can consist of the upper class, middle class, white people or capitalists, whilst the latter can involve the working class, minority groups or people outside of the labour force entirely (Harvey & Potter, 2009). For the purpose of this thesis, the relational space taken up by the general middle class, including people who hold some sort of higher education and receive a more than liveable income, will be of most relevance.

3.3   Urban Space as the Metropolis

The concept of the metropolis is developed by Simmel and is defined by a psychological "intensification of nervous stimulation" (1950:1). The metropolis, being a form of urban space, contrasts rural life through the heightened experiences of constant impressions and more even intellectual consciousness. This environment relies on habits, rules and structure, and can conceptually be compared to most major cities of today, as this image of rationality goes well in line with them as economic and labour-intensive centres. It is not a coincidence that global mega cities, like London, New York or Shanghai are also centres for major banks and stock trade. As centres for structure and growth, urban environments affect people through stimulating an intellectual, rational attitude, in which the individual is made more independent, as well as more anonymous (Simmel, 1950:4). One might argue that urbanity is conditioned by freedom and self-realization enabled by a certain level of indifference. Rurality, in contrast, can be described as driven by emotion and interdependency, far from offering the anonymity and ever-growing monetary wealth of the urban (Simmel, 1950:2). Hence, the urban offers space for free-reign ambition, where one can thrive if complying with its structure. The downside of this is that spending time in the metropolis can instil an alienation, where anonymity is true for both individuals and goods. This suggests that urbanity fosters a disconnect between production and consumption, in the long run inducing a feeling of inauthenticity into the urban lifestyle. This is not to say it is without character or liveliness, rather that the experience of the urban is a highly subjective and individualistic one, intrinsically tied to modern culture (Simmel, 1950:10).

Furthermore, post-modern thinker Debord originated the phrase *society of the spectacle*, attributing "the spectacle" as the chief product of the contemporary metropolis (Short, 2014:75). From this viewpoint urban space is performed, as well as built, and negotiated through symbols and images. Much like Murdoch, this definition entails that urban space is relational and formed through interactions. More specifically, Debord dubbed this performance a "spectacle" because of the excess of images inherently present in modern cities as a result of capitalism and globalization (Short, 2014). One might conclude that engaging with this "spectacle" along with embracing the stimulation of the urban environment, encourages a culture in which the metropolis is not only a physical space but an attitude or preference. Relationally acting within the set boundaries and opportunities present in the city can, in this case, mean to individually perform urbanity, fostering a behaviour that makes sense in that specific context.

3.4   Push & Pull Factors of Migration

A general tool for understanding migration between urban and rural areas has been developed by Lee (1966), who argues that migration is defined as a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence that involves an *origin*, a *destination*, and *obstacles* along the way (Lee, 1966:50). When applying his analysis, he adds on a fourth factor, *personal circumstance,* as it sets the context for the initial three. The *push and pull* model is made up of identifying "pluses" and "minuses" at origin and destination, as well as the obstacles in between, acknowledging that different factors can be experienced as positive or negative depending on the migrant's personal circumstances (Lee, 1966:50). For instance, people who have children might value proximity to schools highly, whilst people without might be indifferent. Similarly, a young, single professional might have a preference for a rich nightlife, whilst an older, retired couple might contrastingly find this an undesirable attribute in a destination.

When pursuing migration, the migrant weighs the "pluses" and "minuses" of origin and destination respectively, and makes a decision based on the most favourable environment. However, there are considerations differentiating between how we experience our point of origin versus destination. The level of knowledge regarding the current area of residence is often much larger than that of the potential, shrouding the second in mystery. The imbalance in information regarding origin and destination is likely to affect the resolve to go through with

migration, unless there is certainty surrounding the benefits. However, if someone we know speaks well of a potential destination, changing our perception of it, the choice to migrate might be re-evaluated. Alternatively, if we experience a robbery in our neighbourhood, our origin, it is likely to change our attitude towards the more unknown destination, not minding the lack of knowledge if it means getting away from the place where we now might feel unsafe.

Additionally, the obstacles between the two locations further add to the challenges of migration, ranging from being perceived as annoyances to insurmountable. These can include the cost of migration, distance and physical barriers: such as borders or bodies of water (Lee, 1966:51). There is also a component of random occurrences to take into consideration, as well as the fact that decisions on migration are not made in a vacuum. It is likely that an occurrence in one location might change the perception of another. Again, judging these collected factors comes down to personal circumstance, meaning that one's social network, monetary resources, cultural values or a number of other affiliations, might impact how each person weigh the risks and rewards of migration.

Having established the components of migratory patterns, there are different conclusions to be made regarding volumes of migration, one being that "The volume of migration is related to the difficulty of surmounting the intervening obstacles" (Lee, 1966:53), which becomes especially important in a time of technological advances. Improved communication and transportation are both factors that can be deemed to make the balance between origin and destination less important. By decreasing the intermediate obstacles, improved technology ultimately results in increased volumes of migration. Other important key words tied to volume of migration are *economy*, *age* and *established routes* as these help explain migration as a relational occurrence (Lee, 1966:52-56).

4. Methodology

This chapter presents the methods used to acquire the empirical data which is the basis of analysis. Initially, there is a section arguing the relevance of the chosen method, followed by the delimitations of a small-scale research project such as this. Thereafter the method used, and the processing of the data is presented in detail. Finally, the chapter is concluded with a methodological reflection.

4.1   Research Design & Choice of Method

This project is based on small scale, qualitative research design through conducting a case study, enabling a deep and detailed analysis of the collected data (Denscombe, 2018:23). As is common within qualitative research, the analysis and processing of data has been a continuous process, allowing for a more dynamic execution. Furthermore, the starting point for the research design is an inductive, rather than a deductive one. This is partially because of the lack of previous research within the field, as phenomena related to the Covid-19 pandemic are not yet extensively studied. Rather than going in with a hypothesis, an inductive approach allows for the empirical data and case to act as guidance, within which the results will be cultivated (Farthing, 2016:118). During the duration of the project, allowances have been made to adjust and revisit themes and research questions, as the collection of data has introduced new interesting viewpoints relevant to the field (Denscombe, 2018:25).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen and conducted in order to answer the posed research questions, enabling a profound understanding of the data, rather than what could have been provided through a more quantitative method. Choosing a singular method, rather than combining multiple, could be considered a weakness if not the aim of the research was to reach a detailed understanding of the individual and collective drives behind urban emigration, within a set time frame. Triangulating through multiple methods just for the sake of triangulation, would have made it harder to reach a deep understanding of the subject, within the limited timeframe of a bachelor's thesis. Instead, the data collected through semi-structured interviews have been thoroughly processed and deemed more than adequate in answering the research questions posed (Silverman, 2017:208-210).

4.1.1 Delimitations

The main delimitation of this essay is the choice of a qualitative, small-scale angle rather than that of a large scale, quantitative research project. This is partially due to the limitations that are naturally associated with a bachelor's thesis. However, the main reason for the choice of a smaller empirical scale has to do with enabling a more narrative based analysis with in-depth understanding of the drives and motivations of the partaking respondents.

It is further important to take the geographical delimitation into consideration. The aim of this thesis is to gain understanding of a phenomena within Sweden, regardless of if it would have been possible to observe it abroad. Expanding the subject pool to beyond Sweden would have caused too much strain on finding general qualities, as different countries and parts of the world have been affected very differently by the pandemic as well as have different basic urban conditions. Instead, the focus of inquiry is people who have left Sweden's major cities during, or prior to, the pandemic. The range of current, non-urban residence differ between the subjects. The decision to base the study on personal experience rather than professional, is based on the sociological assumption that individual agency is tied to norms and society, in this case making the personal recounts more valuable than the speculation of a professional.

4.2   Case Study

In order to gain an understanding of the specific event that is migration patterns in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, this essay will be based on a case study research design. Case studies are well established within the social sciences, as they are suitable for small-scale qualitative research. Case studies tend to focus on relationships (Denscombe, 2018:87), which is in accordance with how this thesis focuses on peoples changing relationships to their surrounding environment. Furthermore, the scope of this thesis is such that it investigates the contemporary phenomenon that is urban emigration in the context of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in Sweden. The combination of phenomenon and context provides the clear boundaries preferable for cases study research (Yin, 2014:17). Another point of importance is that a small-scale research project like this is more suitable for *analytic generalization* rather than *statistical generalization,* again well in accordance with the procedure of case studies. As the case in question is made up by a small pool of migrating individuals, it is relevant to acknowledge the value of the conclusions as a way to further understanding, rather than being a sample of statistically representative subjects (Yin, 2014:40).

4.3   Semi-structured Interviews

The empirical material is based on six semi-structured interviews. The interviewees were chosen through an explorative and subjective selection. The benefits of this selection include the opportunity to handpick the most suitable subjects, focusing on personal experience within the frames set by the research questions. The inquiry to participate was spread through professional as well as personal networks, encouraging the respondents to spread it further, opening up to additional selection through snowballing (Denscombe, 2018:67-68, 70). The advantage of this sort of selection is mainly time efficiency and easier personal connection, making the interviewee feel comfortable discussing more personal questions (Yin, 2014). As this essay is based on personal experiences, it was important to not only go through professional networks, as the participants' professions matter little. Hence, the invitation was shared on Facebook to enable reaching a broader crowd. That being said, the selection being based on people in the researcher's proximity makes it valid to assume that personal circumstance such as level of education, social class and geographical location will be reflected in the reach of the inquiry.

The main criteria applied to find relevant respondents to interview, was that they needed to have migrated from one of Sweden's largest cities (Stockholm, Gothenburg or Malmö) to a non-urban residence, since 2016. The time span was set to include migration made before the start of the pandemic, as to enable a degree of comparison between the interviewees who moved during and those who moved before. However, the inquiry focused on finding the former, as collecting empirical data on the drives of moving *during* the pandemic was key to being able to answer the research questions. In the end, six interviewees were selected and deemed an appropriate number. To ensure a level of anonymity without de-humanizing them, the interviewees will henceforth be addressed with the aliases provided in the following chart.

Chart 1. Information on the interviews conducted.

	Date	Length	Location of interview	"Name"
Interviewee 1	2021-04-12	45 min	Zoom	*Samuel*
Interviewee 2	2021-04-12	48 min	Zoom	*Andreas*
Interviewee 3	2021-04-13	43 min	Zoom	*Josefin*
Interviewee 4	2021-04-19	59 min	Zoom	*Sarah*
Interviewee 5	2021-04-20	46 min	Zoom	*Julia*
Interviewee 6	2021-04-22	49 min	Zoom	*Sofie*

All correspondence with the interviewees were conducted over e-mail. A few days prior to their interview, the interviewees were sent a consent form providing more information on the project as well as informing them of their role (see appendix a). Each of the interviewees gave their oral consent to be recorded at the beginning of the interview. The interview guides used were developed in accordance with guidelines for the structure of semi-structured interviews (see appendix b) (Denscombe, 2018). The questions are posed in an open-ended and neutral way, making each interview dynamic and personal. The questions were used in a *developmental manner*, meaning that the interview guide was revisited and re-evaluated ahead of each interview, preserving the themes but tweaking the questions or order depending on the person and on the discoveries made so far (Denscombe, 2018:269).

All of the interviews were conducted over *Zoom,* a digital conference tool. The reason for this being the current restrictions on social interactions in response to the covid-19 pandemic. Much like conducting interviews in person, the ability to see and hear one another well is key to the quality of the data. In all instances, the interviews were conducted with both parties in a relatively quiet home environment, allowing for the interviewee to feel comfortable. It is also of importance to discuss the role of the researcher in the interview setting. Because of the matter in which the interviewees were chosen, I, the researcher, have some degree of a previous relationship to most of them. It is likely to assume that the answers given might be affected by having a more personal relationship with the interviewee. However, this relative lack of neutrality is not necessarily a weakness, as previous knowledge of the interviewees personal life might also make it easier to interpret the answers given. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that regardless of personal relationship, the identity of the interviewer in relation to the interviewee will always affect the outcome to some degree (Denscombe, 2018:279).

4.4   Data Collection & Processing

The interviews were all recorded using a private smartphone's recording app. These sound files were later transcribed to enable a more thorough analysis and comparison of common themes. In addition to providing more detailed and accessible data, transcribing all of the interviews creates an opportunity to get to know the empirical material before officially initiating the analysis, as is preferable within qualitative research (Denscombe, 2018:395). The downside of working with transcriptions rather than the original sound files, is the eventual loss of meaning communicated through intonation or pronunciation. This relative weakness is made up by

including short field notes taken at the time of interviews, as well as repeatedly listening through the sound files in cases where any confusion or ambiguity is present (Denscombe, 2018:397). Since the interviews were conducted in Swedish, the quotes used throughout the essay have been translated to English. It is important to note that these translations are interpretations of what was said, as it was deemed more important to translate the *underlying meaning* rather than perfectly word by word.

4.4.1 Literature Review

Before initiating the analysis, an overview of previous research and other relevant information was conducted through desktop research. This included reading through and about scientific articles, newspapers, pop culture phenomena and reports produced by relevant actors. Search words used included *Counter-urbanization, urbanization, ruralization, the green wave, Covid-19, the pandemic, urban flight,* as well as *the pandemic and migration.* Critically reviewing the literature enabled a finding of key ideas that have been useful in labelling and understanding the themes of the empirical material and analysis (Denscombe, 2018:475). Besides providing an overview of the field of research, many of the relevant themes and concepts discovered can be further read about under chapter *2. Background.*

4.4.2 Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, the data collected is processed through a codebook developed in accordance with the important themes and theories of the essay (see appendix c). The codes were developed in a way as to enable a narrative based analysis, having the interviewees stories and their positioning of themselves make up the centre point of analysis (Silverman, 2017). The coded transcriptions were then summarized as to find mutual themes and narratives, as well as to compare differing stories and drives.

Through the use of codes, the material has been sorted and re-sorted, all in the pursuit to get to the core of what is of importance for this particular study. After reaching a relatively final thematic coding, the material was reduced to only keep the relevant parts for analysis, maintaining overarching values and points of importance whilst also selecting quotes of particular pungency (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015:97, 103). In order to not take what said out of context, the quotes used throughout chapter *5. Analysis,* have been kept in their entirety when possible, rather than fragmented. Because of this, this thesis will slightly exceed the set word limit. This relative weakness was assessed to be less important than accurately and thoroughly

conveying the empirical material. Rather than sorting the analysis and its chapter through the coded categories, headings corresponding with commonly appearing narratives, underlying meanings and important events were chosen and further elaborated on with the help of the more descriptive codes. This too, has been treated as a continuous task (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2015:106).

Chart 2. Contextual information regarding the interviewees.

	Family	Upbringing (urban/rural)	Moved from (urban)	Moved to (non-urban)	Timing (pandemic)
Interviewee 1 - Samuel	Lives with partner and dog	Rural	Flat, Malmö	House, Hässleholm municipality	During
Interviewee 2 - Andreas	Lives with partner and three young children	Rural	Flat, Malmö	Rowhouse, Lund municipality	Before (2019)
Interviewee 3 - Josefin	Is moving in with partner	Rural	Flat, Malmö	House, Eslöv municipality	During (not moved yet)
Interviewee 4 - Sarah	Lives with partner and one young child	Urban	Flat, Malmö	House, Eslöv municipality	During
Interviewee 5 - Julia	Lives with partner and one young child	Rural	Flat, Stockholm	House, Herrljunga municipality	During
Interviewee 6 - Sofie	Lives with partner and two young children	Rural	Flat, Stockholm	House, Karlskrona municipality	Before (2019)

It is worth noting that although the interviewees have all moved from one of Sweden's top three largest cities, their new residences all differ in terms of size of surrounding built environment. Dalby, to where Andreas moved, is a town with about 6 500 residents (Lunds kommun, 2021), contrasting other interviewees, like Sarah, who describes how their closest neighbour lives a couple hundred meters away. Hence, the interviewees' current residences can more broadly be described as *non-urban,* rather than strictly rural. However, since they all *experience* their environment to be rural, this term is not inaccurate either.

4.5   Methodological Reflections

As previously established, the role of the researcher plays a part in qualitative research, not the least in the analysis of qualitative data. Nevertheless, having former knowledge of the subject can be a strength in the process of drawing conclusions. It is important to be aware that the findings presented are subjective and, as is the case with small scale research, hard to reproduce.

When it comes to ethical considerations, the data collection and processing were conducted in a way that was well within the framework of research ethics (Farthing, 2016:187). The participants were informed about the purpose of their participation and made anonymous, as to respect their privacy. The quotes included are not deemed to threaten this anonymity, and when necessary have been altered to ensure this, such as through the removal of names or locations. The sound files containing the interviews are to be deleted from all platforms after the completion of the thesis.

5. Analysis

This chapter aims to answer the research questions through an analysis of the empirical data collected through interviews. The analysis is presented through themes discovered during the processing and coding of the interviews. The thematic subchapters individually engage with the relevant theoretical concepts, which then leads into the final conclusions in the following chapter.

5.1   The Longing for Rural Life

In spite of the broad spectrum of the interviewees' current non-urban residences, the actual descriptions of rural space were mostly consistent. *Freedom*, *space* and *greenery* were common positive themes, whilst *being isolated*, *geographically distant*, or *lacking a selection of goods and services* were mentioned as negatives. Furthermore, one of the main drives of making the urban to rural move is an inherently emotional *longing* for the countryside. Almost without exception, the interviewees described the decision to move being made on instinct, on a feeling of either being "done" with the city or "ready" for the countryside. Most interviewees describe a slow process, where the longing for something other than the urban has grown over a course of months, if not years. This was made especially clear by Sofie, when she was asked about the reasons behind moving away from the city:

> *We felt that we were starting to be "done" with Stockholm as a city, as well as with living in a big city.*
>
> <div align="right">Sofie</div>

Understanding the interviewees' previous urban residences through the concept of the *metropolis*, one can conclude that the interviewees all shared an origin which was defined by stimulation, anonymity and abundance (Simmel, 1950). Whether by a change in lifestyle or simply the emotional process already mentioned, the interviewees could be described as disillusioned with the *spectacle* of the big city.

> *[…] we feel like we've made use of the entertainment offered and are "partied out", or what to call it. This longing back to the countryside, to be closer to nature and able to have animals, has just grown stronger and stronger these last few years.*

Samuel

It appears that the longing for a rural lifestyle has more to do with a longing for *something else* than the urban intensity (Short, 2014), rather than for rural life itself. Clearly present in the interviews with those who have a rural background, was the sense of moving "back" to the countryside. Regardless of how long the person in question had been living in an urban area, there seemed to be a certain level of nostalgia tied to making the change from an urban to rural environment. This romanticized attitude towards rurality, was mainly present with the interviewees who have young children. Often mentioned in relation to this imagery of providing a certain childhood, was the desire to be closer to other family members, most of whom still live in a rural environment.

> *[…] because we had had two children and wanted to offer them something else, a calmer environment to grow up in, and to be closer to our own families.*
>
> Sofie

Thus, having children might make one re-evaluate the positives and negatives of origin and destination, creating a natural influx in the volume of migration (Lee, 1966). Here, the interviewees pose no exceptions. "Being closer to nature" was a theme that arose particularly often within the majority of the interviewees with children, along with the ability to simply open the door and let one's child outside. This further proves the point of re-evaluating one's environment, as the specific combination of *closeness to nature* and *security* was not as highly valued by the interviewees without children (Lee, 1966).

> *[…] we wanted to be able to let [our child] run free for example. And that doesn't work in a city, I think, regardless of where you live, because there's traffic and sort of a different feeling to living in a city for me, and that just really didn't suit our lifestyle.*
>
> Andreas

True for all interviewees seemed to be the perception of the limitations of the urban environment to allow for the desired lifestyle, hence having to change environment to be able to change themselves (Murdoch, 2006). The underlying power dynamics of this sort of migration will be further elaborated on in the final subchapter.

5.2   The Pandemic

Regarding the effects of the pandemic on the interviewees' choices, there are clear connections. When asked about the pandemic, most interviewees brought up themes of agency, not wanting to give the pandemic too much credit for its presence in their lives, nevertheless acknowledging that it definitely has affected them to some extent. Both Andreas and Sofie, who moved out of the city just before the pandemic, expressed gratitude for "having gotten away" before they were rushed out or forced to compete with an intensified housing market. The other four attributed their move to be tied to the pandemic to some extent, not as the sole reason, but rather as a catalyst or an added factor to consider.

> *So, I think the pandemic made so that we had to have a good look in the mirror and some pretty heavy talks on how we want our life to look, and how we relate to each other.*

<div align="right">Sarah</div>

Sarah, who was reluctant to move out of the city before the start of the pandemic, accredited it for making her and her partner re-evaluate the way they were living and conclude that it was time to move. In Sarah's case it is clear to see how the pandemic caused a shift in her relationship with her environment (Murdoch, 2006), being the final straw in an ongoing discussion to re-locate.

5.2.1 The Pandemic & Urban Space

The pandemic has undoubtedly changed the interviewees relationship with urban space. The interviewees accounts of their experiences of the city during the pandemic support the idea that the urban is a place of increased stimulation (Simmel, 1950). When social restrictions were imposed to halt the spread of the virus, the defining stimulation of the city became more wearing, as described by Samuel:

> *[…] the things that could be annoying in the city, the noise pollution, crowdedness and stuff, all of a sudden that was all that was left, and the positives you liked, sort of disappeared.*

<div align="right">Samuel</div>

Some of the interviewees elaborated further on how the appeal of the city had faded over the course of time. With diversity of goods and services being one of the most mentioned defining qualities of the city, no longer having use of them seemed to greatly affect the overall appeal. This demonstrates how the events tied to one location can change the perception of other destinations. In this case making the origin city, as well as other cities, less attractive and the alternatives, like rural dwelling, more so (Lee, 1966). Sarah, who is the only participant with an urban background, described a conversation she had with a friend still living in a big city. When asked about her feelings surrounding the decision to leave the city and move to the countryside, she recounted:

> *But what I said to her was "as long as there's a pandemic, there's nothing to miss".*
> *Later, when the pandemic is over, then there might be a backlash of some sort…*
> *but I'm not certain, because we are so… we are quite content.*
>
> Sarah

The fact that the appeals of the city become inaccessible has a clear effect on the interviewee's relationships to their environment. In the interviews, the urban physical structure was described to have become constricting rather than synonymous with the freedom of choice and goods that used to define it. This loss of freedom can as well be experienced as a loss of privilege and agency. It puts people in a position where they experience a greater powerlessness over their environment, as the urban is a place where power structures become apparent (Harvey & Potter, 2009; Murdoch, 2006).

5.2.2 The Pandemic & Digitalization

Another consequence of the pandemic is the decree to work from home and the reliance on technological infrastructure. The interviewees describe how working from home has made it possible for them to do their work further away from their workplace, hence enabling the move in a way. Julia describes how the time away from the office has made the urban to rural migration more seamless and gratifying, enabling the argument that digitalization has removed some of the *obstacles* that would be otherwise daunting (Lee, 1966).

> *I think this pandemic has been awful, everyone probably does, but for me it's been*
> *positive to be allowed to work from home this much. I've obviously saved a whole*
> *year of commuting, and that's money to me, but also more time to be home.*

Julia

What digitalization has done then, is remove the obstacles related to *distance* (Lee, 1966). There is no longer a need for people to live in proximity to their place of work, but rather a need for a home office space, in turn requiring more living space. Hence, some of the interviewees experienced working from home as an event forcing, rather than enabling, them to move in search of a more spacious residence.

> *For us, the biggest downside in these times was that [our flat in the city] became extremely crowded. And as long as there's a decree to work from home, it simply wasn't possible to live like that.*

Sarah

The emergence of a new culture surrounding office work is an interesting phenomenon to discuss. It is, however, important to note that this opportunity is not accessible to everyone. As office work is a field largely tied to a certain social class, the dream of the countryside is an exclusive one. Industries, hospitals, restaurants and many other sectors, are still dependent on a relatively geographically tied workforce, making those less likely to pursue living farther away from their place of work, regardless of the circumstance. In short, digitalization might enable the middle class to exchange urban life for rural, but most likely not the working class. It is arguable that these geographically shifting power dynamics will, in the long run, alter the way we relate to the urban and rural environment, respectively.

It is also worth noting that digitalization might have meant more for counter-urbanization than the pandemic itself. After all, the inaccessibility of many uniquely urban qualities, such as access to goods, services and culture, are most likely only temporary. As society opens up after overcoming the virus, most remaining businesses and organizations will be eager to return. Yet, all interviewees describe their intentions to be to remain in their non-urban residences for many years to come. One can argue that it is the progression of digitalization that is driving this desire, rather than the pandemic, since the former is likely to stay now that it has become an established system.

Still, I could see that if the digitalization lasts and continues in this direction it will be much, much, much easier to live in the countryside, and then that could be something to consider for many.

Samuel

Again, removing the often overpowering obstacle tied to *distance*, migration is made more accessible (Lee, 1966). The romantization of rural life, apparent even before the pandemic, has been made an attainable dream for the middle class through the ability to work from home. Furthermore, as certain interactions are moved to digital platforms, the social networks informing urban structure might be redistributed, and consequently change its form. To have no need for urban office spaces could mean entire city districts losing their purpose and having to "rebrand", providing an opening for a redistributed cityscape (Harvey & Potter, 2009).

5.3   The Freedom to Migrate

A point of importance made clear in the interviews, as well as through the discussions thus far, is the ability and resources to move. *Relational sociology* and *relational space* both tell of how the power over our environment is closely tied to our power within the very same structure, making and re-making urban space a privileged projection (Emirbayer, 1997; Murdoch, 2006). This can be said to be equally true within the *push and pull model*, as personal circumstance is key in how we perceive both our origin and destination, and perhaps even more importantly, the obstacles in between (Lee, 1966). In addition to the already described *longing*, the process of migration requires an element of *freedom, power* and *agency* to do so (Emirbayer, 1997).

5.3.1 Privilege & Power

All interviewees have in common that they, and often their partner, have achieved some sort of higher level of education. Multiple interviewees have also mentioned their privileged position as one of the prerequisites to even consider moving at this time.

[…] Here I'm thinking: If we didn't have the money and the question wasn't posed, we would've had to make do, in a way. But now, since we both have stable jobs and a nice income, the dream grows from the possibilities.

Sarah

Social class is bound to affect the freedom to migrate as the choice is largely dependent on resources. Not only can migrating be costly, but there are also implications on one's work opportunities and social ties, not to mention possible unpredictable events. To be able to assess this as manageable, is a privileged decision. Some interviewees described how they will make less money or live further away from their workplace as a consequence of moving out of the city; that they made the move without having a secure income, temporarily relying on their partner and on the conviction that they will find a new job quickly. Without capital, this financial uncertainty could have been an insurmountable obstacle (Lee, 1966).

> *We have had a decrease in income, a conscious one, it was part of our analysis that "we will go down in pay". But we still made the decision that "that's okay, we're going to gain other things".*
>
> Sofie

However, when asked about the choice to move to the countryside, one interviewee accounted it to the countryside being cheaper than the city. Josefin described how she and her partner had initially looked for a flat in the nearby town of Lund but soon searched outside of the city as they deemed the prices to be too high. The house they ended up purchasing cost the same or was even cheaper than some of the smaller flats they had considered in the city.

> *It felt a bit like a combination of coincidences that it showed up right now and was possible, but then it's also a dream I've sort of had, to live in the countryside in the long run.*
>
> Josefin

The fact that the rural offers a relatively cheaper choice could answer for some of its appeal, but it is important to keep in mind how the ability to move anywhere still is a privileged position. The price of Josefin and her partner's chosen residence was not the reason behind moving, rather a bargain found on an already planned migration. The privilege lies in the ability to even consider migration through home ownership as an option. Similarly, some of the other interviewees described how living in a rental flat in the city was financially unfavourable and how purchasing a home outside of the city would be cheaper in the long run. Being able to purchase your way out of a financial disadvantage is, again, a privileged position to be in. Furthermore, as the interviewees testify of house prices rising, it becomes even more so.

5.3.2 Individual Agency & Expectations

Related to the privileges associated with being able to move is the agency of choosing to do so. In addition to having the opportunity, the majority of the interviewees are young professionals with small children, and as such, some of them have expressed an expectation for them to move out of the city sooner or later. As family becomes more important, the ambitious lifestyle associated with the city seemed to be expected to become less important. This wave of migration can hence be deemed an expected one. In accordance with the *push and pull model* some volumes of migration are concentrated around young professionals, as well as along established migratory routes (Lee, 1966). As previously mentioned, both of these correspond with the interviewees who have moved "back" to the countryside, often closer to their families and as an active choice to reprioritize their lifestyles.

However, choosing to move away from the familiar urban environment involves challenges, some to be expected and some that were surprising to the interviewees. As established, there is privilege and a romantic image tied to urban-to-rural migration, which causes there to naturally be some culture clashes. In accordance with the idea of *the metropolis*, one can argue that there is a performative culture tied to urban dwelling (Simmel, 1950). Julia described how she had been humbled by settling into her new environment and the people there, as the difference in desired tempo initially caused some friction in her new rural relationships.

> *People who haven't gotten to know me yet, with them I think I need to have bigger humility and sort of tiptoe to not be perceived as "that person from Stockholm who thinks she is somebody". I absolutely need to be aware of that.*
>
> Julia

This clash between people who perform urbanity and the people whose space they move into, might not need to be dramatic but can certainly be a point of discussion. As people of a certain social class, with enough capital to make a privileged move, make their way into rural communities, so do their politics. The fear of having to endure "backwards" worldviews from their new neighbours, have been apparent in most of the interviews. However, these fears have also been described as in the end not having any merit, as most describe having been welcomed into their new communities with open arms. Although, it is of importance to note here that the interviewees in question all pass as normative Swedish people and most likely do not visually

stand out from the crowd in which they have been welcomed. When asked about her own stereotypes and expectations regarding the countryside, Sarah touches upon the same conclusion:

> *I experience them all to be extremely friendly, but I wonder how they would have been towards us if it had showed that neither of us are born in Sweden for example, or if we'd had parents who were born outside of Sweden.*
>
> Sarah

It is interesting to reason around how the increment of urban emigration could potentially change the rural environment. To enter a community with different political values, expectations and lifestyles could undoubtably affect the rural composition, much like social values inform the urban physical structure (Murdoch, 2006). The interactions allowed through this merge of urban and rural values could lead to interesting new ideas or clash completely, nevertheless connecting networks that otherwise might have remained quite separate from each other (Emirbayer, 1997). Some of the interviewees have already had their stereotypes challenged and are positively surprised by the diversity they have experienced in their relatively short time in a non-urban setting.

> *This group is more homogenous, but in a way it's also more multifaceted here than [our son] would have experienced in [central Stockholm]. So, I think it's positive, he gets to play with kids whose parents are industrial workers or carpenters, but also with those who have parents who are economists and so on.*
>
> Julia

Even though most interviewees put diversity as an urban quality, there seems to be a different kind of diversity to be found in the communities they have migrated to. However, it is important to note how this could be conditioned by the local communities in question, rather than be a generalizable rural quality, since most interviewees reside in similar regions that are not necessarily representative of the composition of all Swedish countryside.

5.3.3 The Possibility of a "New Green Wave"

At the end of the interview, the interviewees were asked about their thoughts on being a part of a new "green wave". Having been given a short summary of the phenomenon and its political

implementations, the responses varied but the underlying meaning seemed to be uniform. Migrating from urban to rural space was not a political statement, but they did not mind if their move contributed to the cause. Namely by encouraging a relatively greener lifestyle, slowing down unsustainable levels of urbanization and consuming less for the sake of consumption. Although, some interviewees also argued for the rural lifestyle being less sustainable than the urban, bringing up increased transportation and unnecessarily claiming geographical space as arguments for this. The combination of political and individualistic implementations when moving to the countryside was further discussed by Julia, who described it as an ideological win-win situation:

> *I think out of principle that the level of urbanization these last few years is damaging for the country [...] Then again, I can't say I would have moved solely for that reason if I couldn't ensure that I'd be able to provide for my family.*
>
> Julia

Regardless of their political views on the possibility of a "green wave", the dream of a rural lifestyle was already apparent in most of the interviewees' minds, as previously established. It is then likely that there is some merit to the potential of a *new* "green wave", as the interviewees are likely shaped by the trends observed, however subconsciously (Emirbayer, 1997). Furthermore, if the new "green wave" is not political, then it is likely to be about self-fulfilment. Once again reinforcing how a privileged social class can afford to exchange urban life for rural, whilst maintaining their privileged position. This does not mean that the intentions and implications of migration are not sound and likely to be positive, it simply means that the associated target group is not the same as in the 1970's. Rather, it is clear that the time passed, and contemporary context allows for new priorities to take hold, namely more individualistic ones.

6. Conclusions

This chapter aims to return to and answer the research questions posed:

- *Why are people increasingly moving from urban to rural areas?*
    - *How does the Covid-19 pandemic factor into current trends of urban emigration?*
- *And, how do societal events, like a global pandemic, change the way we relate to the urban environment?*

This thesis can be concluded by arguing that the observed trends in urban emigration can be linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, this does not mean that the urban emigration would not have occurred without it. Rather, the pandemic has worked as a catalyst, making people who were already considering or expected to migrate, do so faster and sooner than they otherwise would have. Analysing the empirical material has revealed that the pandemic and the associated digitalization have removed *obstacles* present when considering migration, as well as given reason for people of a certain social class to re-evaluate one's *origin* and contingent *destination* (Lee, 1966). However, one might argue that since the pandemic is relatively temporary, and the effects of digitalization more permanent, the latter has a greater long-term effect on urban emigration. Regardless, the events of both build on a longing for rurality which is principally tied to the office-working middle class.

Furthermore, the pandemic has made unavailable some of the defining qualities of *the metropolis*, leaving only the relatively overbearing nervous stimulation (Simmel, 1950). As such, our relationship to the urban environment has changed through other qualities becoming more highly valued: living in proximity to one's workplace has been replaced by having additional space for a home office, diversity of goods replaced by closeness to nature and so on. This rural preference seems to be particularly tied to individuals usually working in offices, who are currently limited to working from home. This new work culture combined with the experienced anonymity and crowdedness of urban space seem to, for some, have resulted in an experienced isolation. The ability to exchange urban life for rural projects a privilege through being able to purchase a way out of an unfavourable position, hence, those who are able to, have a degree of power over their environment (Harvey & Potter, 2009; Murdoch, 2006).

It is however, of importance to once again note that the migration discussed in this thesis was often planned or thought upon even before the emergence of the pandemic. The romantization of rural life is a notion that already existed amongst the middle class, which current events only served as a catalyst to act upon. Compared to the "green wave" of the 1970's, this trend of migration seems to be individualistic and about self-realization, fostering a "green alternative" for the middle class to lead with.

In summary, the combination of digitalisation and the Covid-19 pandemic seem to have made the urban environment temporarily redundant, as closeness and proximity have turned to isolation and lack of open space, making it unable to fulfil needs that might be considered to be found elsewhere. This, in combination with a fostered longing for rural life, shows how current trends of urban emigration are not occurring out of a vacuum, but in response to a certain societal event and context, available to those who are able to seize it (Emirbayer, 1997).

6.1   Reflections & Further Research

Having established how digitalization could further enable office work to be done remotely, it could be of interest to further research the consequences for the city and its inhabitants. As the need for urban office spaces lessens, cities as we know them might need to adapt, opening up for a new era of urban space perhaps dominated by a new social class.

Furthermore, the frame of analysis of this essay has allowed for a discussion surrounding urban to non-urban migration mainly based in the south of Sweden. Going forward, one could further research the effects on more strictly rural communities. Consider the north of Sweden, where regions are facing worrying levels of negative net migration, meaning a depopulation in favour of the more metropolitan regions. It would be interesting to investigate if counter-urbanization lead by the middle class could be key in revitalizing the northern countryside, building on the possibilities of remote work as well as the idealization of rural living. Regardless of if this could actually be a feasible option, I would argue that the potential of the phenomenon is relevant for planners to consider further going forward.

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8. Appendices

Appendix A: Consent form

Pandemin & flykten från staden

Varför flyttar människor från städer till landsbygden under en pandemi?

Om uppsatsen

Syfte: Syftet med uppsatsen är att ta reda på de faktorer som driver människor att flytta från urbana till rurala områden under en global pandemi. Uppsatsen skrivs inom kandidatprogrammet *Samhällsplanering: urban och regional utveckling* och kommer därav även resonera kring hur förståelsen för människors flyttmönster kan vara till nytta i planeringen av samhället.

Genomförande: Utöver en grundläggande litteraturöversikt kommer uppsatsen främst ha sin grund i de semistrukturerade intervjuer som genomförs med privatpersoner som de senaste fem åren flyttat från stad till landsbygd. Det bredare tidsspannet kommer användas för att urskilja generella faktorer från de som är knutna till pandemin och dess konsekvenser.

Samtycke

Ni har blivit ombedd att delta i denna intervjustudie då du uppfyller ovanstående kriterier. Ert frivilliga deltagande är otroligt viktigt för uppsatsens genomförande och uppskattas enormt. Intervjun beräknas ta cirka 45 minuter och genomförs förslagsvis digitalt över videotjänsten Zoom. Om ni skulle föredra något annat format går detta såklart att ordna. Intervjun kommer, med ert samtycke, spelas in på en mobiltelefon för att senare kunna transkriberas. Ert samtycke ges frivilligt och kan när som helst tas tillbaka om ni så skulle önska. Om ni har några ytterligare frågor om uppsatsen eller ert deltagande, tveka inte att fråga!

Jag ger härmed mitt samtycke att delta i den ovan beskrivna studien.

_____
Namn

_____   _____
Intervjupersonens underskrift   *Intervjuledarens underskrift*
Datum: *Datum:*

Appendix B: Interview guide

Tema 1 – Intro
- **Berätta lite om dig själv!**
    o Vad jobbar du med?
    o Hur ser din familjesituation ut?
    o Vart är du uppvuxen?

Tema 2 – Tidigare boende – stad
- **Vart/hur bodde du tidigare?**
- **Hur skulle du definiera staden?**
    o Vad är unikt med staden?
    o Vad tycker du personligen är den största fördelen, respektive nackdelen, med att bo där?

Tema 3 – Nya boendet – landsbygden
- **Vart/hur bor du nu?**
- **Hur skulle du definiera landsbygden?**
    o Vad är unikt med landsbygden?
    o Vad tycker du personligen är den största fördelen, respektive nackdelen, med att bo här?
- **Vad har du för relation till landsbygden sedan tidigare?**

Tema 4 – Jämförelse
- **Varför flyttade ni?**
    o **Varför vid den tidpunkten?**
    o **Hur tog ni beslutet?**
- **Hur upplever du skillnaderna mellan att bo i stad respektive landsbygd?**
    o Vart känner du dig generellt mest ”hemma”? Stad eller landsbygd?
    o Är det något du saknar med att bo i staden?
    o Hur upplever du dina relationer med grannar och andra i din närhet på respektive plats?
- **Har flytten levt upp till dina förväntningar?**
    o Är det som du trodde att bo på landsbygden?
- **Hur reagerade människor i din omgivning på din flytt?**
    o Känner ni andra som gjort samma sak?

Tema 5 – Koncept
- **Har pandemin påverkat din relation till där du bor, och isåfall hur?**
    o Tror du att pandemin hade påverkat dig annorlunda om ni fortfarande bodde i staden?
- **Har digitaliseringen påverkat din relation till där du bor?**

      o   Har den underlättat flytten?
- **Känner du till "den gröna vågen"? Och skulle du isåfall säga att du är en del av den?**
    - Den "gröna vågen" innebär en trend av utflytt från stad till landsbygd, som på 70-talet hade en politisk drivkraft.

Tema 5 – Framtiden
- Hur ser du på när saker är tillbaka "som vanligt"? När Corona är över?
    - Arbete på distans?
- **Vart tror du att du kommer bo om 5 år? Om 10?**

Appendix C: Codebook

Codename	Colour	Definition
The Urban	Blå	What factors the interviewees put as defining the urban environment and living in a city, pros and cons.
The Rural	Grön	What factors the interviewees put as defining the rural environment and living in the countryside, pros and cons.
Personal circumstances & goals	Gul	Personal circumstances and goals which played a part in the move from one environment to another. E.g. Family situation, job opportunities, reactions from surroundings, and dreams of self-realization etc.
The move	Mandarin	The effects and obstacles of moving from an urban to a rural environment, eg. making lifestyle changes, expectations and worries.
The pandemic	Laxrosa	Mentions of the pandemic and its effects on the interviewees' relationships to their environment.
Digitalization	Magnesium	Mentions of digitalization and its effect on the interviewees' relationships to their environment, eg. their work situation, transportation etc.
Political & ideological standpoints	Lavendel	Mentions of different political standpoints related to the move, eg. the "green wave", self-sustainability, the urban norm etc.